

Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art 2011



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A piece of writing can be greatly influenced by the surroundings in which it is written; an attempt to write a poem, story or play about or set in a particular place can be completely different if written in that place as opposed to visiting it in memory or examining a photograph of it whilst in reality sitting in a library or at a quiet desk.

- Choose two contrasting locations, e.g. the café and the gallery space on the third floor. Spend at least ten minutes writing in each location. If you are stuck for starting points, try describing the space around you and imagine an unusual reason for a character to be sitting next to you.
- Compare the pieces from the two locations. Do they feel different? If the answer is yes, do you think any of this difference is related to the physical location in which you wrote them?
- In your opinion, which location produced the strongest writing? List the qualities of this location that you found helpful. Is it possible for you to recreate some of these conditions when you next sit down to write?
- List the qualities of the location that you found less helpful. Is it possible for you to avoid some of these conditions when you next sit down to write?
- Look at the two lists you have just created for each location. Is the effect of any of the qualities that you have listed evident in the creative work that you produced? To what extent has the nature of the physical location changed the content and style of your writing?
- Think about other factors that may have affected you on the days that you visited the galleries, such as your general mood, the weather, time available... Do any of these factors explain some of the observations that you have made so far?
- Consider the place where you usually write. What are the qualities of this place that may be helpful or a hindrance to the current project that you are working on? Would it be helpful to vary your location when writing? (e.g. would a particular scene from a play be best written while you are sitting in a train station or a busy café)

Bessie Surtees House 2011



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Find somewhere comfortable to sit with a clear view of a door or window. Write for 3 minutes about what is on your side of this door/window. What can you see, hear, touch, taste, and smell? When writing, be sure to 'freewrite' – don't pause and don't question what you're writing.

Now write for 3 minutes about what is on the other side of this door/window. What can you imagine seeing, hearing, touching, tasting and smelling there? Again, be sure to freewrite.

For 1 minute, write a list of all the things you've escaped from (or would like to escape from).

Now choose one thing from your list and write about it for 4 minutes, without actually naming it. For example, if it's 'work', describe the work itself and how it affected you. Visitors to Bessie Surtees house said they had escaped from: 'no-one talking to anyone else'; 'no control'; 'too many clear-cut answers'; 'sirens wailing'; 'monkeybrain'; 'the left hand not knowing what the right hand was doing'; 'thin soil'.

Now think about a door (or window!) you passed through to begin your escape from this thing. Even if you moved to another continent to escape, try to focus on a particular door along your journey. Write for 4 minutes about this door and try to be specific. Use your senses. What could you see, hear, touch, taste and feel as you moved through the door?

Next, write for 4 minutes about what you escaped to. Again, describe this rather than naming it. For example, instead of 'peace', describe what makes you feel at peace. Visitors to Bessie Surtees had escaped to: 'a ten pole plot'; 'a million lights reflected in water'; 'warm beer'; 'cycling past sheep to work'; 'being able to hear'; 'a restuffed prayer cushion'; 'the sound of pebbles in the pull of the tide'; 'a rock-face worn smooth by many hands'.

You will now have three 'chunks' of text about an escape, real or imagined, that you have made. Draft these chunks into stanzas. Remember to keep the writing as specific as possible, and to make full use of sensory detail.

City Library 2011



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Pick a date. It could be today's date, a birthday or any other random or memorable date. Write out the date in figures on a sheet of paper (e.g. 9/3/1982).

Pick a letter of the alphabet (e.g. G).

Find the corresponding bookshelf in the library.

Count along and write out the titles of the books corresponding to your date (e.g. 9th, 3rd, 1st, 9th, 8th, and 2nd for 9/3/1982) on any of the rows on that bookshelf.

Return to your seat. If you're working in a group, share the titles you've written down with each other.

Now try and construct a 5 to 10-word micro story from the titles you've written down. (10-20 minutes)

Share, read out your micro story to the group. Discuss.

The following example is based on the date 9/3/1982 and the letter 'G'.

The 9th, 3rd, 1st, 9th, 8th, and 2nd books from rows in the G bookshelf are:

The Seven Days of Peter Crumb by Johnny Glynn

By the Tide of Humber by Daphne Gozar

The Whole World Over by Julia Glass

The Seven Days of Peter Crumb by Johnny Glynn

Soulmates by Miranda Glover

The Chinaman by Friedrich Glauser

One possible micro story from the above titles could be:

'Soulmates! Seven whole days. Soulmates?'

Dance City 2011



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- Step 1: Select a form of dance, e.g. ballroom, tango, ballet, contemporary, street, tap, tribal belly dance and jazz.
- Step 2: Spend some time (perhaps 5-10 minutes) researching the terms for that form of dance, so you have some new vocabulary to draw upon. If you're in Dance City, have a read of their brochures or take some time to look at the art in the central foyer.
- Step 3: [NO MORE THAN 3 MINUTES]
Begin to describe a dancer as they are warming up and entering into their performance, WITHOUT using the word 'dance'. Describe their body, their emotions, and their relationship to the environment. Is it dark/light? Is there music? Is there an audience?
- Step 4: [NO MORE THAN 3 MINUTES]
Now imagine that dancer is in a class with others. Imagine them beginning to dance with a stranger: again, WITHOUT using the word 'dance'.
- Step 5: [NO MORE THAN 5 MINUTES]
Now change partners – go with the stranger – and now imagine them dancing with someone they don't know, while they remember someone that they have recently lost or use a joyful memory. How would this affect their dance? What is it about the new dance partner that prompts these memories? WITHOUT using the words 'loss', 'sad', 'joy', 'tears', or 'dance'.
- Step 6: [NO MORE THAN 5 MINUTES]
Now change partners – again, go with your new character – and imagine them dancing with the partner they arrived with but wanting to be dancing with the person they just left behind. What was it in that person's movement or body that made them so interesting? WITHOUT using the words 'dance' or 'face'.
- Step 7: [10 MINUTES OR SO]
Now, work all these pieces together with a narrative that this is the last class these dancers will ever have together. Why? What has happened?

If you're working in a group, read out your first draft and get feedback. Then leave your story for a week or so. Then go back to it, and see if it still makes sense to you. Are there pieces missing? What are you telling rather than showing? Where can it be cut? Are there bits you can use? Work on it, or not. It's your story.

Discovery Museum 2011



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Visit the *Story of Fashion* exhibition and browse through the items on display. Wait until a particular piece of clothing catches your eye. Is it a huge black picture hat from the end of the 19th century that looks like a flying saucer (maybe it really is!)? A pair of Hessian-covered platform shoes from the 1970s? A designer dress from today?

- Imagine yourself wearing this piece of clothing. Describe the colours and the materials. How much work went into making it? How will it feel to the touch? And how does wearing it make you feel? Try to write using as many of your senses as possible – some materials have a smell, as well as a feel.
- Make a list of all the clothes that stick in your memory – ones you loved, ones you hated, ones that made you feel silly or itchy or glamorous or grown-up. Put a star next to the ones that really mean a lot.
- Choose one and write a memory of you and the item of clothes/shoes. Remember to describe how they looked, felt and smelled.

Younger writers might like to pick an interesting item from the display and give the shoes/hat/clothing a magic power – perhaps a hat makes you see inside other people's thoughts? Perhaps the shoes allow you to run faster than a cheetah?

- Tell the story of the magic and what happens when someone – you? – decides to try the items on.

Great North Museum 2011



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Some objects in the museum attract a lot of visitors – the Egyptian mummy and T.Rex, for instance. The mummy was hugely, almost magically, important for the Egyptians who embalmed her, as well as for today's visitors. The Romans would have been awe-struck by the god Mithras sacrificing a bull, which is represented on a great stone slab in the Worshipping the Wall gallery.

Other objects may have been 'powerful' in their time even if we don't see their power now. But could you look at an object with 'powerful' eyes and see the power that others don't?

Flash fiction is a story that is very short. Everything the reader needs to know is in the story. There's a plot (something happens); characters (who have a crisis to cope with); and something to make the reader think. Can you tell a short adventure story about the hidden power of an object from the museum?

Write your adventure story as a piece of flash fiction, no longer than 500 words. Your version should include:

- How the object got into the museum
- A chase
- A sign of the object's power
- Attempts to conceal the object's power
- Someone else trying to get hold of the object

Hatton Gallery 2011



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'Ekphrasis' is an ancient tradition in which one artistic medium is used to describe or express a work from another artistic medium. A poem inspired by a painting or a painting of a sculpture would both be examples of ekphrasis. By the nature of this shifting of forms the original work will never be entirely faithfully reproduced but the new creation may well contain something of the essence of the original; ekphrastic writing is often at its best when it does this while simultaneously taking on a life of its own.

- Find an artwork in the gallery that stirs an emotional response in you. This may be positive or negative reaction. Note the name of the piece and the artist.
- Imagine that the artwork can speak to you. Now write in the voice of the artwork for ten minutes without stopping. Begin by imagining the artwork is telling you a secret, if you find yourself pausing for longer than a few seconds, return to the secret and have the artwork tell it to you again.
- Write an address to the artwork in the second person (i.e. using the pronoun "you"). Again, try to write for ten minutes without stopping. Tell it what you really think of it – good or bad. It may be helpful to begin by simply describing the qualities of the artwork – for example 'You are blue. You are made of oil.' If you get stuck, return to this process of simple description.
- It is the opening scene in a film that shares a title with the artwork you have chosen. Two people are standing in front of the artwork. Person A is trying to talk to person B about something very important. Person B doesn't want to talk about the important thing but rather to discuss the artwork. Write a duologue between person A and person B. Do not explicitly refer to either the important thing that person A wants to discuss or the reasons why person B is avoiding the subject.
- Leave the raw chunks of writing alone for at least a week. Then return to the pieces of writing and select the one which appeals to you most of the three. Work this piece into a poem, story or scene.

Laing Art Gallery 2011



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This exercise is about creating a story and describing what happens in that story in the most concise way possible.

- Select two characters from paintings hanging in the Northern Spirit Gallery - they do not have to come from the same painting.
- Give each of them an urgent and significant problem they need to resolve. Their problem should be sufficiently compelling to motivate all their actions.
- Consider when, and where their lives might converge.
- Make one of their lives change irrevocably, as a result.

Spend ten minutes writing up to 100 words about the above four points. If you're working in a group then read your writing out to each other when the ten minutes are over.

Now try to edit your 100 word story-synopsis down to 50 words, without losing the plot!

Life Science Centre 2011



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The research and activities at the Life Science Centre owe their existence largely to the work of James Watson and Francis Crick. In 1953, Watson and Crick discovered the structure of deoxyribonucleic acid – DNA. This is the chemical which holds all the information – the genetic code – that tells the cells in our body how to multiply and reproduce themselves. Sometimes this process can be modified. With a positive outcome, over a long period of time, species evolve; with a negative effect, diseases like cancer can result. The discovery helped us to explain an enormous amount about ourselves and the world we live in.

Watson and Crick made their discovery by a simple but brilliant piece of creative thinking. They gathered information, often based on complicated techniques, from several sources, but instead of examining it on paper, they built a model from cardboard and wire. They found that there was only one way in which all the pieces could fit together and still explain the data – two interwoven strands: a double helix. Once the structure was clear, the way in which the molecule reproduced itself was obvious.

The models at the Life Science Centre give plenty of food for creative thought. They may in the first place suggest a poem or a story, or you can imagine what it might be like to be a scientist and make important discoveries.

- As you look round the Life Science Centre, can you think of a new exhibit or an activity that you would like to see there, one which would add something extra to the stories already being told?
- Describe it in 50 words, or draw it, and explain why it should be there.
- You have made an important discovery that you know will help to cure a serious illness. What would you like the discovery to be?
- This discovery has come after several years of research. Write a short story or poem about the discovery, to describe how you think you would feel.

The Lit & Phil 2011



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Does the chair you are sitting on have a dedication plaque? Does the chair next to you? Find one of these dedication plaques; what does it say? To whom is it dedicated? What do you think this person looked like? What did this person do?

- Write a 'pen picture' – a little written description – of the person you imagine.

Now look at the many 'busts', statues and paintings of people around the library and choose one which captures your interest.

- List words describing this person. For example, does this person look cross? Happy? Grumpy? Wise? Old? Fed up?

Imagine this person could come alive for 5 minutes to talk to you. What might that person say? What would you say?

- Write a short piece of dialogue about the conversation you would have.

Tens of thousands of people have been in this room since the Library opened. What kind of reasons for visiting do you think they may have had? Imagine a character from the past who visits the Library for a very unusual reason.

- Write an account of what that person is doing here.

Northern Stage 2011



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Try this exercise sitting at a table in the café/bar area. Imagine that it is early evening and someone has just walked into the foyer and gone to collect tickets from the Box Office; they're here to watch their youngest child play the lead role in a new production. Write three sentences for each of the following questions, answering with the first thing that comes into your head.

- What are they wearing?
- How old are they?
- How old is their youngest child?
- What kind of production is their youngest child acting in?
- How far did they have to travel to get here?
- Why are they here alone?
- Where would they rather be?
- What do they think of their youngest child being an actor?
- What are they planning to do before the play starts?
- What happened to them on the way to the theatre?

Read back over your answers, and take five minutes to jot down any further details that come to mind: expand your description of their clothes, think about what might be preoccupying them, and let yourself imagine both their physical and emotional reaction to being at the theatre.

Now you are going to turn these details into the first draft of a story. Start your story with an action (e.g. ordering a drink, making a phone-call, trying to find a spare table) and introduce conflict as soon as possible: what does your character want and what is preventing them from getting it?

If you're having trouble getting started then use the following prompt: complete the sentence below and keep writing for ten minutes. During those ten minutes you're not allowed to stop writing.

- 'As promised, the tickets were waiting and all I had to do was...'

The Sage Gateshead 2011



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If you are planning to try this during a concert then you'll need to bring a pen and notebook - something discrete, no A3 pads! Otherwise there are places in the building itself which are private in which you could sit with a personal stereo or MP3 player. There are also listening booths within the Sage's own library.

The exercise involves responding to music. Pick a piece that intrigues you, that you perhaps have a strong connection with emotionally, or – if you're lucky – something which piques your interest in a way you can't fathom.

- Don't stop writing until the music or passage of music ends.
- Whilst writing you should put out of your mind what you are writing about, the subject, and allow yourself to record the thoughts and feelings that occur as the music plays.
- It may be that the tempo of the music, or the mood the music presents, affects the speed at which you write or the style of your writing. You may write something which feels entirely unrelated to the music you are hearing. The key is to occupy one part of yourself with the music whilst writing absolutely anything that comes to mind.
- You mustn't stop writing during the exercise, even if it means writing down 'what am I writing?' or 'ums' and 'my mind is blank'. Ask yourself: if this music were playing in a film what would the story be? What would the mood of the scene be? If this music described a character what would they be like?

You can carry on writing as long as you wish, but in the first instance you might want to say: I will definitely write for 5 or 10 minutes. Then stick to writing for the whole length of time... if you're inspired, carry on.

Seven Stories 2011



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This exercise was inspired by the Enid Blyton exhibition at Seven Stories and is called 'Seven Questions in Search of a Plot'.

Answering the following questions should provide the makings of a classic, Blytonesque plot. Imagination at the ready? Then off we go!

- What is hidden in the disused mine/barn/factory?
- What first arouses the children's suspicions?
- Who doesn't believe them?
- Who twists their ankle during the first attempt to solve the mystery?
- Who goes missing/gets captured during the second attempt to solve the mystery?
- How do they all nearly die during the final attempt to solve the mystery?
- What does the Chief Inspector/Queen/Millionaire say when it's all over?

Insert ample opportunities for lashings of ginger beer and sardine paste sandwiches. Hurrah!

The Shipley Art Gallery 2011



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This exercise is inspired by the overcoat on display in the gallery. Here is the start of a story about Lec, his sister Mara, and the Coat of Power. Lec and Mara's adventure with the coat is what you write! The only rule is that you have to start and finish the story with the beginning and ending provided below.

BEGINNING

- It had rained all night. It was raining when they woke up and they still couldn't go to the beach. Lec and Mara kicked each other behind the sofa till Dad told them to push off. 'Explore the house or something.'

'It's boring,' said Lec. 'It's just a stupid holiday house,' and he ran towards the kitchen, slamming doors so that the walls shuddered.

Mara chewed her thumb. Dad might tell them off again. Slowly, the door under the stairs swung open and she peered into the cupboard. You never knew. Then, 'Hello,' said Mara, 'there's an opening.'

Dirty stone steps led down into darkness, so Mara fetched her torch. They set off, Lec breathing hotly into her hair. 'Fan-tas-tic!' he whispered as they discovered that the basement was enormous. The narrow yellow beam of light from the torch wavered. They crept through cobwebs and round corners. The air smelt peculiar – not mouldy and rotten like a basement, but strangely spicy. It was getting hotter.

The Coat was fixed halfway up the farthest wall, its shape rounded as if somebody still wore it...

Your story about Lec and Mara comes next. The coat could become anything – a pair of red wings, a huge balloon, an owl – but you have to finish with THIS:

ENDING

- ... slowly the coat took back its grey, woolly shape, stretched like a sleepy cat and jumped up to its place on the wall as if nothing at all had happened. The adventure was over: for the moment.

Theatre Royal 2011



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The 2010/2011 pantomime at Theatre Royal was Robin Hood. If Robin Hood and his Merry Men had a Facebook page, what do you think they would write in their status updates?

In this exercise, you will be using the format of a Facebook news-feed to create a new story about Robin Hood's adventures in Sherwood Forest.

- Write a list of important events and situations from Robin Hood's adventures in Sherwood Forest. Where do these things happen? Who else is there? What conflicting opinions are held? Who knows what? When do people meet? How do characters feel about each other?
- Now turn each item on your list into something which might come up in Robin Hood's Facebook news-feed. (e.g. joining/leaving a group; change in relationship status; adding work info; status updates; attending an event; adding someone as a friend; 'poking' someone; sending someone a gift; 'liking' a page or update; becoming a 'fan'; 'tagging' someone in a photo or a note).
- Rearrange the order of the events in the news-feed so that they tell a coherent story. Feel free to add in any extra ideas which occur to you. Remember to include all the characters (e.g. Maid Marion, the Sheriff of Nottingham, Friar Tuck, Robin Adair) as 'friends'.

Once you have finished writing about Robin Hood, why not try writing the story of Cinderella in the same way?

Tyneside Cinema 2011



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One of the house managers, alone in the darkened building while she was closing up for the night, saw a figure she thought must be an elderly regular who wears a mac. ‘Can I help you?’ she asked. She glanced behind to check that she’d shut the door, and the next second the guy had vanished. The site used to be a monastery, as street names—Pilgrim Street, High Friar Lane—indicate. Answer these questions with a sentence for each one, writing as quickly as possible

- You are either a ghost, or the person who sees the ghost. Answer the rest of the questions from the point of view you choose. Who do you see?
- You are watching a movie, or about to watch one, or you have just seen one. Which movie? What did you like or dislike about it?
- What sounds can you hear? Does the ghost make a noise (or does the person who sees it speak)?
- You take something out of your pocket or your sleeve. What is it?
- You catch sight of yourself in a mirror, or become self-conscious for some reason. What do you look like?
- An unexpected smell reaches your nose. What is it?
- Do you move towards the ghost (or the person who sees the ghost) or away from them?
- Are you alone, or is somebody with you? Do they see things differently?
- Why is the ghost hanging around? What trauma or desire has kept them (or you) here?
- How can the ghost be freed?

If you are in a group, each person reads their answers aloud. You may then use your own answers or other people’s to develop a story or poem. If you’re working alone, select the answers you find most interesting and unusual for development.